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CITATION:

IGBOANUSI, Herbert. AGENTS OF PROGRESS OR PROBLEM-MAKERS?: MISSIONARY ACTIVITIES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE IGBO LANGUAGE. African Study Monographs 2006, 27(4): 157-168

ISSUE DATE:

2006-12

URL:

<https://doi.org/10.14989/68253>

RIGHT:

## AGENTS OF PROGRESS OR PROBLEM-MAKERS?: MISSIONARY ACTIVITIES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE IGBO LANGUAGE

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**ABSTRACT** During the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Christian missionaries became active in various areas of southern Nigeria, including Igboland. Missionaries later learned and developed indigenous Nigerian languages in order to reach the people and spread their gospel. In particular, the missionaries worked hard to study and develop the Igbo language. However, rivalry between various missionary groups may have resulted in crises and conflicts that adversely affected the language as well as attitudes toward it. This study investigates the roles played by Christian missionaries in the development of the Igbo language, with the goal of determining whether they were in fact agents of progress or problem-makers.

**Key Words:** Conflict; Development; Igbo Language; Missionaries.

### INTRODUCTION

Igbo is one of Nigeria's three major languages. Along with Hausa and Yoruba, Igbo is an indigenous 'national' language and serves as a regional lingua franca for southeast Nigeria. Spoken as a first language by over 20 million Nigerians in the five southeastern states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo as well as in the Delta and Rivers states, Igbo belongs to the 'new' Benue-Congo (Bendor-Samuel, 1989) or the West Benue-Congo language families (Williamson & Blench, 2000).

During the development of Igbo, the language has been the focus of a number of crises and conflicts, which continue to be reflected in the attitudes people have toward their language, in their perception of the adequacy or appropriateness of the language as a medium for literature and mass media, in their appreciation of the language's relevance in modern education, and in the measure of their loyalty and love for the language. Declining interest in the Igbo language, which may be connected with these crises and conflicts, has been a major worry for many Igbo people.

Christian missionaries laid the foundation for the study of the Igbo language. Their efforts produced a written version of Igbo, creating a legacy for the Igbo people. The missionaries paid considerable attention to the development of Igbo, sometimes against the wishes of both the Igbo people and the colonial government. Ayande (1966: 301) offers the following insight:

In Igboland, as far as the Church Missionary Society was concerned, the Bible, which by 1910 was being translated in Union Ibo at great cost in time and money, was the main book the society wanted its pupils in Iboland to read, and not the English version. This meant that emphasis must be placed upon the vernacular, which the administration did not recognize.

Missionaries have often been correctly credited with bringing most West African languages, including Igbo, to global attention. The Christian missionaries not only initiated the processes of developing these languages, they also encouraged vernacular education with an emphasis on religious instruction. However, for several reasons, which may be blamed largely on the missionaries themselves, the Igbo language did not develop to the same degree as Hausa and Yoruba. In this respect, Hair (1967: 98) referred to the case of Igbo as 'disappointing' because, in particular, of the low volume of printed Igbo literature compared to the size and variety of materials printed in Hausa and Yoruba. In other words, by an accident of history, the missionaries laid the foundation for lingering crises and conflicts relating to this language that continue to threaten its growth. Tracing the origins of these crises and conflicts is important for clarifying the history of the Igbo language.

## EARLY STUDY OF IGBO

A brief account of the early study of Igbo is necessary to acknowledge the contributions made by early missionaries as well as to trace the beginning of the problems related to the language.

The trans-Atlantic slave trade, which involved the shipment of thousands of black Africans to Europe and the Americas, was one factor motivating the early study of West African languages in general, and Igbo in particular. One of the greatest problems encountered during this trade was that of communication between European slave dealers, African middlemen, and slaves. To solve this problem, slave dealers needed either to learn the language of the slaves or to teach the slaves a European language. Europeans tended to focus on learning African languages for two main reasons. First, learning an African language from slaves would enable Europeans to directly deal at coastlines instead of having to rely entirely on the services of middlemen. Second, apart from the confidence produced by knowing the language of African customers and slaves, Europeans reasoned that knowing the language of the slaves would help slave masters to keep slaves in check, particularly in the event of possible plans for mutiny.

Any study of Igbo should make mention of G. C. A. Oldendorp, a German pastor of the Moravian Brethren, who visited the West Indies in 1766–1767 to collect materials for a history of the Brethren's Caribbean mission. Oldendorp became interested in the slave population he encountered and wrote about their

African origins and languages. Hair (1967: 72) reported that of Oldendorp's 28 brief vocabularies of African languages (published in Germany in 1777), two were Igbo, and titled 'Ibo' and 'Kalabari'.

Ex-slaves also played an important role, particularly Olaudah Equiano, an Igbo ex-slave who, in England, transcribed some Igbo words in his 1790 autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vasa The African*. In 1828, Quaker missionary and educationist Hannah Kilham collected the vocabularies of several African languages, including Igbo.

Up to this point, all efforts toward developing the Igbo language had taken place outside Igboland. The first study of Igbo within Igboland was conducted by Edwin Norris (assistant secretary to the Royal Asiatic Society) during Macgregor Laird's Niger expeditions of 1841 and 1845. The published account of the expeditions included a list of 70 Igbo words.

While Norris prepared his guide to languages of the Niger, the Church Missionary Society (CMS) arranged to send two missionary-linguists on the expedition (see Hair, 1967: 74). The two men selected were J. F. Schön, a German missionary and Samuel Crowther, an African school teacher, both mission staff in Freetown. Schön had previously been studying a Sierra Leonean language and, with his new task in mind he began to study Igbo and Hausa while still in Sierra Leone. By 1840, he had collected a vocabulary of 1,600 Igbo words and had translated a few Bible prayers. Later that year, as the expedition sailed up the Niger through Igboland, Schön attempted to communicate in Igbo. He was greatly disappointed to learn that the dialect he had spent so much time learning in Sierra Leone differed greatly from the dialect generally used in Igboland. His greatest shock came in Abo, where he read a prepared Igbo address to the Abo chief. Unable to comprehend Schön's pronunciation and intonation, the chief became bored and interrupted the reading.

Schön's problems were related to his failure to realize that Igbo had several dialects and, more importantly, that the Isuama Igbo he had learned in Freetown was a pidgin Igbo that was spoken in Sierra Leone but not understood in Igboland. Schön was so disappointed at this setback that he abandoned the study of Igbo for Hausa and only resumed its study 20 years later. Schön's frustrating experiences with Igbo dialects were only the beginning of the setbacks that occurred in relation to this language.

Following discussions with Baikie (commander of Macgregor Laird's next expedition), Crowther wrote to CMS authorities recommending that a mission be instituted on the Niger, with headquarters at Onitsha in Igboland. The recommendation was accepted, probably for two reasons. First, establishing a station at Onitsha would satisfy the wishes of the Igbo ex-slaves in Freetown. Second, the Niger was seen as a new route to Hausaland (a long-time objective of missionaries). Consequently, Crowther was instructed to prepare for a mission to Igboland. He quickly sent for Simon Jonas (who had served as an interpreter during the 1841 and 1845 expeditions), and the pair then spent some time in Lagos to study Igbo.

On July 26, 1857, the mission arrived at Onitsha after a brief stopover at

Abo. The CMS mission consisted of Crowther, a number of Igbo-speaking catechists from Freetown, including Simon Jonas who was to serve as interpreter, and Rev. J. C. Taylor. Taylor was born in Sierra Leone of Igbo parents who did not speak the same dialects; he was, however, familiar with Izuama Igbo.

While Crowther and Baikie continued up the Niger, they left Taylor, who was specifically ordained for the Onitsha mission, to organize the headquarters. Taylor had only limited knowledge of Igbo, so he traveled to England to learn the language from Schön (who at the time was carrying out his language studies at Chatham). This constituted another setback for the language; Schön was probably still only familiar with Izuama Igbo. However, after studying for several months with Schön, Taylor began to publish in Igbo. According to Hair (1967: 83):

His journal published in 1859, included a small collection of Ibo proverbs, and in the same year he published a catechism in Ibo. In 1860, he followed these with an Ibo sermon (preached in Freetown) and translations of a Gospel and extracts from the Prayer Book, and he also revised Crowther's primer.

Taylor returned to the Niger in 1860 and continued his translation work there. In 1866 he finished translating the New Testament into Igbo and published the remaining Gospels, Acts, and most of the Epistles between 1864 and 1866. Taylor and his assistants at Onitsha also published a few hymns in 1871 and most of the Prayer Book from 1871–1872. Taylor's study of Igbo ended in 1871 after he was transferred from Onitsha to Igbebe, and then to the Sierra Leone mission due to ill health.

Crowther's work developing the Yoruba language was more successful than Taylor's work in Igboland. As a Yoruba man, Crowther was widely accepted and also spoke the language fluently. Because Taylor did not speak an acceptable dialect of Igbo, he was regarded as an outsider. He also made no serious attempt to utilize the locals at Onitsha, which was part of his undoing.

Schön's earlier problems with dialect divisions must have influenced Crowther to adopt the Izuama dialect in 1857. A conference of Igbo translators held in Onitsha in 1875 to discuss problems related to the Igbo language made the following decision:

The standard and reading dialect of this language is strictly to be that of Izuama, it being the one which all the other dialects will learn to speak while Izuama will yield to no other, hence translations will be universally received by the nation.

It was unrealistic to expect that a mixed dialect, which had only served as a contact language for a small Igbo community in Freetown (which had been long separated from the language and culture) would be acceptable in Igboland. Designation of this as a 'standard' Igbo dialect was an unfortunate decision; the

missionaries could have learned about the risks of continuing with this experiment from Schön's 1841 attempt to address an Abo audience.

## UNION IGBO

The early Niger mission failed (as a result of several factors unrelated to this study) and was subsequently reformed under the guidance of a new group of highly committed and more productive missionaries, particularly Englishmen H. H. Dobinson and J. J. Dennis. They conducted linguistic exercises and translated many works.

By the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the increasing number of Igbo Christians produced an urgent need to translate the Bible into Igbo, as the majority of Igbo Christians did not understand English. Regarding this point, thus far, diversity and divisions among dialects had prevented translation of the Bible. To resolve disagreement about dialects, a conference was held in Asaba on August 14, 1905, at which Rev. T. Dennis imposed what he called 'Union Igbo,' an amalgam of features from various Igbo dialects including Onitsha, Bonny, Unwana, Arochukwu, and Owerri.

Union Igbo was adopted for the translation of the Bible in spite of strong opposition because it was not spoken anywhere in Igboland. As expected, Dennis was charged with carrying out this responsibility and, with the assistance of a few other individuals, the Union Bible was published in London in 1913. Union Igbo was also used for translations of other books including the Hymn Book and the Prayer Book. Obiamalu (2002) claimed that the arrival of the Roman Catholic Mission (RCM) at Onitsha and its subsequent adoption of the more acceptable Onitsha dialect was one factor that caused CMS to abandon Izuama Igbo for Union Igbo. If so, this was due purely to rivalry.

Union Igbo has been vehemently criticized as an esperanto dialect (see Achebe, 1979, 1999; Emenanjo, 2001; Uwalaka, 2001). Chinua Achebe, a leading Nigerian novelist of Igbo origin, has been the greatest critic of Union Igbo. He indicated that the emergence of Union Igbo was a curse rather than a blessing, writing:

The ultimate result of his task (Dennis) has been more disastrous to the emergence of a creative Igbo language and literature than any other single factor (Achebe, 1979: 34).

Achebe (1999: 41) later illustrated the difficulty of understanding the Union Igbo Bible by citing Basden (1918):

Bible reading becomes a burden, rather than a duty and a pleasure ... One cannot find Lancashire, Devonshire, Cornish and Somerset dialects mixed up in one Bible. Why should such a system be inflicted upon a poor educated people ...?

Dennis rejected Taylor's translations, claiming that he had a poor understanding of English. He rejected Taylor's translation of the Bible and substituted his own translation. Achebe (1999: 39) observed that the introduction of Union Igbo was not necessarily based on the goal of improving the language; it ensured that the Bible was translated in only one variety of Igbo, which was more economical than publishing the Bible in more than one dialect. Dennis also obstructed or halted any further publishing of the Bible in Isuama Igbo or in any other dialect; for instance, Dennis and his backer Bishop Tugwell frustrated attempts by the Niger Delta Pastorate (a branch of CMS based in Bonny and led by Dandeson Crowther) to publish their own translation of the Bible.

Although Union Igbo was used until 1941 when Ida Ward introduced Central Igbo, it was continually subjected to criticism and controversy, which delayed the language's development.

### CENTRAL IGBO

The Central Igbo dialect was introduced in 1941, and was a product of Ida Ward's research, which was conducted to:

Examine a number of Igbo dialects from the point of view of sound usage and constructions in order to find out if there is a dialect which would be used as a literary medium for African writers and for school publications, which would be acceptable over a considerable area of the Ibo country which might form the basis of a growing 'standard' Igbo (Ward, 1944: 7).

Emenanjo (1995: 219) aptly summarized the problems with Central Igbo:

Central Igbo was a living phenomenon fed by contiguous dialects. But it was the handiwork of manipulation by Ida Ward. The permutation and combination involved was artificial. Again the tendency of some of the dialects to substitute for Central (a part for the whole) as well as the attempts at hijack by different speakers (and missionaries) of the component parts made Central Igbo suspect in the eyes of the other Igbo groups who did not want to identify with it especially immediately after the Biafran experience when short-lived local linguistic independence was the consuming vogue.

Although the central dialect was introduced with good intentions, it added to the confusion and frustration of writers, who were unsure of an authentic dialect in which to write. Before the central dialect was introduced, the CMS had used both Union Igbo and the Owerri dialect to translate religious documents and to produce school texts, respectively. The Roman Catholic Mission, on the other hand, was using the Onitsha dialect to produce both religious materials and school texts.



## PROBLEMS AND CRISES RELATED TO DEVELOPMENT OF THE IGBO LANGUAGE

Emenanjo (1998: 46) blamed crises in Igbo language development on the ‘acephalous nature of Igbo political culture.’ However, Emenanjo’s claim that ‘the non-existence of an Igbo dialect with a pan-Igbo recognition and patronage’ was a factor in the introduction of the three esperanto-like Standard Igbo varieties (Schön’s Isuama Igbo from 1852–1899, Archdeacon Dennis’s Union Igbo from 1900–1927, and Ida Ward’s Central Igbo from 1929–1972) is unlikely. The kind of dialect to which Emenanjo refers could not have emerged from out of the blue. Like the Oyo dialect of Yoruba, a Standard Igbo dialect would probably have evolved naturally if missionaries had avoided making their initial mistakes.

Rather than blame missionaries, Afigbo (1981) showed in detail how the Igbo people themselves were the real reason behind the language’s underdevelopment. Emenanjo wrote, ‘one of our weak points as a people is that we do not know how to manage crises, adversity, failure or misfortune’ (2001: 27), indicating that, in the interest of a common language, the Igbo should have resolved their differences much sooner and adopted a particular standard variety. Achebe (1999), however, blamed the current problems with the Igbo language solely on Dennis and his Union Igbo. However, Dennis and his Union Igbo were not the only setbacks to Igbo; the entire missionary era should share responsibility in this instance. Additionally, the Igbo language faced crises resulting from other factors, associated with the Igbo administrative setup, which was ‘socially fragmented’ (Afigbo, 1972: 7) and ‘politically disintegrated’ (Green, 1947: 3). The language has also been affected by other factors, such as Nigeria’s civil war (1967–1970), problems associated with attitudes to the language, and neglect by the governments of Igbo-speaking states (see Igboanusi & Peter, 2005). While all of these factors have contributed to crises associated with the Igbo language, this study has traced problems that occurred during the development of Igbo to mistakes made by missionaries and the conflicting interests of various Christian denominations, which encouraged unhealthy rivalry.

The following sections critically examine crises and conflicts that occurred relating to dialect and orthography.

### I. The Dialect Factor

Many studies have examined how the multiple dialects within the Igbo language have constituted a major setback to the language. Unlike Isuama and Union Igbo, Ward’s Central Igbo was a living and functional dialect. It was more commonly used than the other two varieties and was accepted as a written language by writers, publishers, and educational authorities.

The dialect factor began with the troubled initiatives made by the early missionaries. Schön’s experience with Isuama Igbo at Abo should have revealed that Isuama was an unused dialect for Igbo. Rather than abandoning this project, Taylor went to the United Kingdom to learn Isuama Igbo from Schön.



Taylor could have learned Igbo from native Igbo speakers within Igboland, but chose to go to Britain. Again, he failed to utilize the services of Igbo interpreters to examine a living dialect.

If Schön and Taylor had learned and spoken a dialect from within Igboland, the history of the language would have changed. Samuel Crowther (who approved the use of Isuama Igbo) should have realized that his introduction of the Oyo dialect in Yorubaland was successful because the dialect had a home base. This experience should have led him to select the Onitsha or Owerri dialect from the beginning. If this had been the case, the Igbo people would have had no choice but to accept it. They rejected Isuama mainly because they could not understand it. Native Igbo speakers also considered it to be a pidgin variety of the language and therefore to have low status.

The missionaries thus created room for disagreement and controversy. They were responsible for Dennis' introduction of Union Igbo, even after the failure of Isuama. Explanations blaming failure on the fact that Isuama was foreign and Union was considered an indigenous experiment are unconvincing. In fact, both versions of the language were related and artificial.

Like many languages, Igbo consists of several dialects that are highly mutually intelligible (Emenanjo, 1998). If handled properly, the multiplicity of Igbo dialects should not have led to problems. It was the rivalry between the various leading religious denominations that constituted a serious problem for the language. For example, the RCM rejected Union Igbo in favor of the Onitsha dialect simply because Union Igbo was a product of the CMS, which had also adopted it. This rivalry caused more harm to the language than any other factor in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## II. The Orthography Factor

The orthography controversy was another important factor that delayed the development of Igbo. Introduction of the Adam-Ward Orthography in 1929 led to a bitter and long-drawn dispute over orthography from 1929 to 1961. On one side of the dispute were the Government, I. C. Ward, R. F. G. Adams, and the RCM, and on the other side were the CMS and the Society for Promoting Igbo Language and Culture (SPILC). Onyekiaonwu (1986: 141) identified three reasons for Catholic support of the new orthography:

One was that they wanted to use the opportunity to undo their archivals, the C.M.S., who had already published their religious materials in the old orthography. Secondly, they shrewdly adopted the New Orthography as a strategy for getting government grants for the expansion of their numerous schools that did not emphasize the teaching of Igbo as they did the teaching of Latin. Thirdly, unlike the C.M.S. who had been identified with the Lepsius Orthography, the R.C.M. had not been identified with any and so anyone other than that associated with the C.M.S. would be acceptable to them.

The RCM only became interested in Igbo language development following the 1926 Education Ordinance, which led to Ida Ward's New Orthography. The Catholics would neither use the old (or Lepsius) orthography nor be identified with any works credited to Crowther and Dennis, since they were associated with the CMS. They therefore allied with R. F. G. Adams (then the Chief Education Officer for Eastern Nigeria) to ensure the enforcement and implementation of the New Orthography. It is widely believed that Catholic support for the New (or Adam-Ward) Orthography was not based on genuine concern for indigenous language development; rather, it was adopted to discredit and negate any earlier endeavors of their archrival: the CMS. In contrast, CMS rejected the Adam-Ward Orthography, with strong support from the SPILC, principally because it would require republishing all earlier works into the new orthography. The divide along lines of Christian denomination made this controversy dangerous and volatile.

This controversy discouraged both writers and publishers from creating any serious work in Igbo because of the likelihood of its rejection by the opposing side. The uncertainty about what might happen next, possibly an entirely new orthography, also caused many potential Igbo writers to write in English (see Igboanusi, 2002) and started what is now known as Onitsha market literature (cf. Obiechina, 1971).

Although the orthography controversy was finally resolved in 1961, with the emergence of the *Ọnwụ* Orthography, it had a devastating impact on the language. The *Ọnwụ* Orthography was instituted following the resolutions of a committee set up by the government to resolve the protracted orthography controversy. The committee was headed by Dr. S. E. *Ọnwụ*, Assistant Medical Director for Eastern Nigeria. Following a series of meetings, during which proposals from groups and individuals were examined, the *Ọnwụ* Orthography, consisting of 36 letters, was accepted in 1961 as the standard writing system for Igbo. The controversy preceding the adoption of this orthography discouraged many writers from writing in the Igbo language. Potential writers either switched to English or abandoned the idea of writing completely. Publishers were also discouraged from investing in the production of Igbo texts.

## CONCLUSION

Missionaries initiated study of the Igbo language and put it into writing. Igbo received considerable attention from missionaries, but compared with the development of Hausa and Yoruba within the same period, particularly with respect to the quantity of materials published in these languages, Igbo was at best unsatisfactory.

Problems associated with Igbo language development began with the missionaries' failure to choose an acceptable variety of Igbo. These problems were further compounded by orthographic controversy, which was fought along the lines of varying religious denominations. Crises relating to the Igbo language, which

were chiefly manifested in conflicts over dialect and orthography, did not only affect the status of the Igbo language in the fields of education, literary creativity, and the publishing industry. They also affected the attitude of the Igbo people toward their language; it created a negative attitude which is the real bane of the Igbo language.

The major setbacks for the language were the controversies, arguments, and disagreements that tended to follow each phase of development. Introduction of Isuama, Union, and Central Igbo all resulted in long struggles over rejection or acceptance, which generally caused breaks in the production of serious works in the language.

The missionaries made a surprising choice when they experimented with Igbo in ways that have not been done with any other language. A standard language may evolve naturally through 'dynamic forces of infusion and exclusion' (Emenanjo, 1998: 46), but certainly not through the artificial infusion of a few selected dialects within a definite period. The evolution taking place in the current Standard Igbo is gradual.

Igbo politics currently involves issues relating to intransigence, 'overdemocratisation' (Uwalaka, 2001), selfishness, obduracy, and uncompromising attitudes, and these have all contributed in important ways to disagreements about dialect and orthography. In addition, some religious fanatics and conservative scholars have continued to write in Igbo using defunct orthographies or local dialects in spite of the seeming resolution among orthographic and dialect conflicts. Still, missionaries were the real agents of conflict with respect to the Igbo language, because they constructed a framework of discord among the Igbo people over dialects and orthography. This problem is still manifested in the disdain with which the Igbo people treat their language. Many people are under the uninformed impression that stubborn dialect and orthographical problems are unsolved, while others consider the language to be inherently difficult to use. Yoruba and Hausa speakers have a comparatively greater loyalty and love for their languages (for patterns in language preference see Igboanusi & Peter, 2005). This difference can be attributed to the solid foundation laid for them by the missionaries. In contrast, missionary activities in Igboland over the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries continue to undermine development of the Igbo language, even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, by having a negative influence on the psychology of the Igbo people, who still consider their language to have little value.

#### NOTE

This is a revised version of a paper that was presented (by proxy) at the International Conference on Igbo in the Twentieth Century: A Tribute to Simon Ottenberg, Ithaca, New York, April 4–5, 2003.

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Accepted *June 18, 2006*

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